

Creating a Day School-Early Childhood Pipeline: Building the Relationship

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to examine the strategies for building a strong and mutually valuable relationship between early childhood education (ECE) programs and day schools. One of the most critical components of partnering with an ECE program is the establishment of a strong and trusting relationship between the day school and the ECE program. The existence of authentic collaboration between the day school and ECE program is vital to the building of this successful relationship. In discussing the need for day schools to demonstrate respect for ECE professional, Diana Ganger, Program Director, Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) said, "when you are respected, you respond."

PEJE has developed several other documents that explore recruitment and retention issues as well as growing enrollment from ECE programs.¹ This document will focus specifically on the critical importance of building the relationship between the two institutions – the day school and the early childhood program. In "Creating a Day School-Early Childhood Pipeline: Building the Relationship," we focus in particular on the key players in the building of the relationship, first steps in establishing the relationship, maintaining the relationship, collaborative programming, and common concerns and possible solutions. The document synthesizes communications with experts in the Jewish ECE field, day school practitioners, PEJE Pipeline grantees, PEJE coaches, and PEJE staff. We ask the reader to regard this document as a work in progress and welcome feedback and learnings gained from day school and early childhood experiences.

Part I: Building a Strong Relationship

In many communities a barrier may exist between the leaders of the day schools and the leaders of the ECE program. Oftentimes, this barrier is a result of the fact that the two programs have rarely interacted outside of the "requesting lists" process. To address this situation and begin to build the relationship, it is suggested that there be open communication between the two schools. Outlined below is a delineation of some of the core components of this relationship and thoughts about strategies for forging the relationship.

Getting started/ The first meeting

The initial meetings are best accomplished in person. Each director should plan to visit the other school. During the meeting, it may be helpful to discuss the background of each program. A potential agenda may include each school's:

- vision
- mission
- philosophy
- pedagogy
- curriculum

¹ "Toward a Proactive, Comprehensive Admission Program: What Every Head of School Should Know About Supervising the Admission Director" by Rheua S. Stakely; "Noteworthy Practices in Jewish Day School Education Volume III: Trends in Growing Enrollment"; "Opening the Gateway from Early Childhood Programs into Jewish Day Schools" (all available on www.peje.org)

The use of collaborative language may be helpful in facilitating these conversations. For example,

- “What do **WE**, as a Jewish community, have to offer to the families in our community?”
- “How can we be helpful to each other?”

Throughout the entire process it is important to remember the main goal – encouraging a continuous Jewish education for children in the community. The establishment and nurturing of this relationship is one key strategy for encouraging communal responsibility for the 0-5 year old population.

Once the head to head relationship has been established, the next “parallel peer relationship” (in the words of Rheua Stakely, PEJE Coach) can be established -- Admission Director to Admission Director. (If the ECE program has an admissions director-otherwise it may be the director of the ECE program) It is necessary to invest a significant amount of time in order to create and maintain this relationship. Because this task may seem daunting, it is suggested that these relationships begin over the summer. It will also be important for the head to identify someone on their staff who can steward the ECE program – day school relationship.

Key players in strengthening the ECE program and day school relationship

Player - Head of the day school:

It is important that the head of the day school communicate in a trusting way. The following are messages that may be addressed:

1) Message: The quality of ECE is valued by the day school

Because of potential pre-conceived notions it may be helpful to begin the relationship with an understanding and acknowledgement of the importance of the ECE program and the excellent Jewish education foundation the ECE program offers.

2) Message: Addressing the concerns of the ECE program director

It is important for the head of school to understand that the ECE director will want to know that there is continuity between the two programs. The head of the day school should give the ECE program director insight as to how the day school will provide a rich environment for the child.

3) Message: Day school mission and acceptance criteria

As the head of school shares the day school’s mission with the ECE director, and learns about the ECE program’s mission, the day school director should also inform the director at the ECE program about the day school’s acceptance criteria. Avoid getting to the point where an ECE program director refers a child with special needs and is then told that the school does not offer any services to accommodate the child.

4) Message: Matching the school with the child.

ECE program directors often feel protective of their families. The head of the day school needs to recognize that the ECE directors are dedicated to finding a perfect match for each child. For this reason, the ECE director may be uncomfortable simply handing over lists. They will want to know the following:

- Will their children feel comfortable and welcomed in the day school environment?
- What kinds of children and families thrive in the day school setting?
- What does the day school have to offer beyond educating the child?

Ultimate Goal: A good indicator that a partnership is being established is if the dialogue has changed from informing and telling to listening and asking, and from dialogue to working together in the implementation of ideas.

Player - Early childhood education program director:

Ideally, if ECE program directors can launch their families on their Jewish journey early on (even in discussing Jewish education options with the parents who have children as young as two-years-old if a toddler program is present) there is a better chance of there being a transition from the ECE program to the day school. ECE program directors may find it helpful to ask families the following:

- What are your visions for your child's future?
- Where will you be sending him/her when he/she leaves our school?
- Discuss the options for Jewish education

Player - Teachers:

Teachers interact with parents on a daily basis and share a strong bond. As a result, teachers are in a position to discuss and recommend schools to parents.

It may be beneficial when teachers at both programs meet to first discuss the vision, mission, philosophy, and pedagogy at each program. Curriculum and standards discussions can come later.

Maintaining the connection

Keep the ECE program updated with information on how their former students are doing in the day school. Pictures of former ECE program students engaged in various activities, notes from former ECE program students and parents to teachers and directors are a few good strategies.

Part II: Collaborative Programming

With a relationship in place, leaders from day schools and ECE programs can embark on collaborative programs.

Joint programs

- Identify individuals in both settings (ECE and day school) that can offer each program value.
- A joint professional development program is an opportunity for the ECE program, kindergarten, and even first grade teachers to work together on curriculum, build collegiality and network with their peers.
- A kindergarten readiness program for parents in the community.
- ECE directors develop programs for their parents about school choice.
- Inquire about the possibility of a day school kindergarten teacher visiting the ECE program to teach a sample-lesson.
- Day school kindergarten teacher visits the early childhood program to observe the program in action.
- Hold a workshop for the ECE program teachers and directors to discuss the attributes of a "day school child" and how a child cultured in a Jewish early childhood program that features Shabbat and Hebrew would thrive at a day school.

- There may be a professional at the day school who could provide a special program or service to the ECE program. For example, at the Pardes Jewish Day School the HOS is an expert in Early Childhood education. She gave her time to counsel ECE program directors and teachers in addition to presenting workshops in the ECE programs.
- If the day school and the ECE program each have a Parent Teacher Organization, the presidents from each PTO can work together, form a relationship, and eventually appoint a specific chair from each PTO to assume specific pipeline PR responsibilities.
- Collaborate to sponsor a Jewish Adult Learning program targeted to parents of ECE students.

Information sessions

Create a “Get to know the school” program for both day school parents and ECE program parents and their children. It may be beneficial to make one aspect of the program child-friendly. This communicates the idea that their children will be able to grow and feel safe in this new environment. This provides the prospective parents with an opportunity to ask questions to both the HOS and the day school parents.

Part III: Common Concerns and Possible Solutions

What to do when an early childhood education program appears resistant to partnering with the day school?

- The day school should be persistent and not give up
- Encourage other day schools to join you in sharing the positive aspects of a day school education
- Invite the ECE program director to understand and trust that the day school encourages the same social experience and environment as the early childhood program
- Frame discussions by saying: “How can we help in continuing to give each child a Jewish education?”

What about early childhood education programs that include a kindergarten?

It is important to pursue a relationship with these schools, however, never compete with these schools for their kindergarten students. It would be better to channel these efforts into recruitment for first grade.

Develop a relationship at the beginning without focusing on enrollment. Over time there will be a stronger relationship to work with at which point it will be easier to discuss recruitment into the day school for first grade.

Expectation for market share

Competition between day schools may arise when they pursue relationships with the same ECE programs. In a situation such as this it is important to remember that it is not simply filling the spots, but making a good fit.

Promoting the continuum of Jewish education in your community

Encourage your bureau, the ECE programs, and the other day schools in your community (if applicable) to convene and discuss the Jewish education system in your community.

Part IV: Conclusion

PEJE, day schools, and ECE programs have a great deal to learn from each other in this important area of growing the ECE program to day school pipeline and building these critical relationships. We welcome and invite your feedback. If you have experiences to share or feedback on this document, please e-mail Linda Mann Simansky at Linda@peje.org.

Prepared by Michele Blechner Nyer, edited by Linda Mann Simansky with contributions from Suzanne Kling and Devra Weiss of the PEJE staff. Based on reports and conversations with Challenge Grant for Day School Growth Pipeline Grantees 2005-2006 and interviews with:

- Mollie Aczel, Coach, Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE)
- Mary Lou Allen, Associate Director, Early Childhood Department, Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE)
- Marcy Balogh, Coach, Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE)
- Harry Bloom, Coach, Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE)
- Jennifer Miller Cohan, Coach, Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE)
- Maria Erlitz, Coach, Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE)
- Diana Ganger, Program Director, Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI)
- Dvorah Heckelman, Coach, Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE)
- Cantor Mark S. Horowitz, Executive Director, Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI)
- Sari Luck-Schneider, Director, Temple Shaaray Tefilla Nursery School
- Karen Simpson, Director, Temple Rodef Shalom
- Dr. Michael Maginn, Coach, Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE)
- Marshall Platt, Coach, Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE)
- Rheua Stakely, Coach, Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE)
- Ilene Vogelstein, Director, Special Projects, Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE)